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The Marvellous Surrealism of Nurse With Wound and *The Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion*

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When the Comte de Lautréamont wrote of a chance dissection of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, he could hardly have foreseen that his idea would become a motto for the production of visual art. The Surrealist movement took Lautréamont at his word, using the unlikely juxtaposition of ordinary objects to provoke an experience of what Andre Breton called the marvelous. Breton however never extended his linguistic notion of the marvelous into sound, and a subsequent history of such juxtapositions in sound work, including musique concrète, neo-avant-garde and Krautrock remains to be thought out. Although a diversity of positions in Surrealism have been exhumed by recent art criticism, this paper is focussed specifically on Breton's own orthodox Surrealist notion of the marvelous. This paper traces the idea within the Surrealist paradigm before moving to the work of Steven Stapleton, better known as the principal artist behind Nurse With Wound. The album, *The Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion* is a chaotic collage of sounds which puts Breton's own theory of the marvelous into practice in the realm of sound art, yet unlike the productivity of visual surrealism, it also enacts a simultaneous negation of this very same marvelous.

The leader of French Surrealism, Andre Breton, rejected the notion of a Surrealist music throughout his life.¹ In the essays "Surrealism and Painting" (1926) and "Silence is Golden" (1944), published some twenty years apart, Breton maintains his preference for poetry and painting.² He listens only to the murmurs of an inner creativity that the orchestra threatens to drown with its hoots of instrumentation. That music is so disdained by Breton is a telling indictment on the present state of the arts of the ear. For the legacy of Breton's attitudes remain strong in histories of twentieth century art practice, which rely on Surrealism as the most influential of the *avant-gardes*. These histories are largely constructed from visual artefacts, leaving the auditory a neglected sensibility. Recent attempts to rethink the place of the visual in Surrealism have turned to the inner ear, to the importance of half-conscious states, to the place of automatism and hypnagogic hallucination in manufacturing imagery and poetry. Some have gone so far as to maintain that the expressions of Surrealist practice, such as painting, are but degraded versions of this inner purity.³ The turn to Georges Bataille's critiques of Surrealism in such influential journals as *October* is an attempt to question those philosophies of Surrealism that Breton established in the early years of the century. Their arguments for a visceral Surrealism often remain bound to the heritage of artefacts that the movement bequeathed to art, circulating between the radical philosophy of a lived Surrealism and its place in an ongoing art history of the bourgeoisie.⁴ These historians appeal to a century that intuitively understands vision, writing for a readership conditioned by technologies of the eye and within discourses that have been conditioned by the politics of the gaze.

Breton's reverence for inner speech, and the subsequent denigration of vision, does not amount to a celebration of the auditory sensibility. For Breton's ear was tuned to the netherworld of the subconscious, to a psychic region that transcends the concerns of the senses. The expressions of Surrealist practice, whether visual or poetic, remain in varying degrees a degradation from this intuitive domain. In the hierarchy of the senses, at least the visual entertains a direct relation to hallucination and dream-imagery, and poetry to the machinic inspiration of automatic writing. There is no analogy for the creation of music or sound among the subconscious states that Breton induced within his Surrealist circle, no banging on pots or hollering through pipes. The night of consciousness was without tone or rhythm. Subsequently, the place of music amidst much of the history of twentieth century art remains marginal.⁵ Who in the general public has heard of the great *avant-garde* artists of sound? While the recordings of Pierre Henry and Meredith Monk languish in the archives of sound libraries, the images of Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock enjoy global fame. Thus the necessity to return to the relation between Surrealism and sound in order to reconstruct the relation between music and the *avant-garde*, so as to interrogate the conditions of art history. The possibility of Surrealist music is to be distinguished here from the auditory aspect of poetry, from the inner voice and from the orchestra that Breton despised. Later I will turn to one album, Nurse With Wound's *Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion* (1985) as an instance of such a music, that bears its own orders of meaning and possibility.

In "Surrealism and Painting" Breton makes his strongest condemnation of music, claiming that it is "the most deeply confusing of art forms," and that images of the ear are inferior to those of the eye.⁶ It is surprising to find confusion disparaged by one who otherwise embraced the strange and the difficult. Confusion here, however, has less to do with the art that Breton promoted than with the chaotic forms that society itself had adopted, a chaos that in 1928 was all too evident in the wake of a world war and amidst economic depression. Breton's response was to highlight the absurdity of society itself, and to support the International Communist Party as a solution to the ills of global capitalism. So when Breton identifies music in this manifesto it is in the form of the orchestra, that instrument by which the bourgeoisie class makes its claims upon a high culture:

So may night continue to descend upon the orchestra, and may I, who am still searching for something in this world, be left with open eyes, or with closed eyes in broad daylight, to my silent contemplation.⁷

Music stands here for the values that had so recently brought about such suffering in the world.

A second essay, "Silence is Golden" (1944), presents a more general problem for a thinking of Surrealist music. By this time Breton was no longer supportive of communism, as the Soviet Union's adoption of socialist realism did not favour the mad art of what was by then a global movement of Surrealism. Here Breton refers to music in a general rather than a political sense, confessing that he in fact knows little about it but that it will always be inferior to poetry. Breton was not the only Surrealist to be indifferent to the potential of abstract rather than linguistic sound for creative practice. Michel Leiris, the Surrealist anthropologist, also thought that music contradicted the intentions of Surrealism. Yet while Breton remains imprecise about the reasons for his disdain in "Silence is Golden," Leiris explains the Surrealist resistance to music in less obscure terms:

There's no way you could have had Surrealist music. In order to have Surrealism, there first has to be realism. There has to be a reality to manipulate. Music (and I am not denigrating it when I say this) has absolutely nothing to do with reality. It's a system that has no signs. Music has no signification. What matters are the relationships between sounds. Surrealist music is inconceivable. Literary Surrealism, yes, because literature is made of words. Pictorial Surrealism, yes, because pictures are made of images. But a musical Surrealism? What could it be based on?⁸

Here Leiris' ideas are tied to a very specific notion of music, in which music is an assemblage of abstract sounds that bears no signifying relationship with the world itself. Surrealism is on the other hand made up of signs. Its psychic effects are dependent on the relationship these signs have with the world.

We can turn to the history of *avant-garde* music to uncover many examples of works made up of sounds both musical and signifying. One example is the collaboration of Eric Satie and Jean Cocteau on the 1917 opera *Parade*.⁹ Wanting to include all kinds of industrial noises to accompany the orchestra, they were forced to settle for a typewriter and a siren to be employed as instruments in the composition. The opera reputedly inspired Guillaume Apollinaire with the term Surrealism itself, but Breton despised Cocteau, and so Satie was also excluded from the Surrealist circle. The duplicity here is between sounds as music and signifying sounds, in the orchestra and the world respectively. The typewriter and siren are taken from this world of signification and made abstract by their relation with instrumentation, made both sign and music. For Breton, *Parade* may well have demonstrated the criticisms he makes of music in "Surrealism and Painting." For here is the orchestra in all its glory, playing to the Parisian bourgeoisie. The Surrealism

of the typewriter, its signification of something outside the orchestra, is subsumed within a compositional structure, an arrangement of musical notation whose abstract and internal relationality bears only a passing relation with reality. The surprising use of a typewriter in an orchestra is in this sense not so much Surrealism as Surrealist, evocative of the ambiguity of the subconscious without being a product of it. What is at stake in this distinction, between a typewriter as a Surrealist instrument and a Surrealist typewriter, are the politics and historical place of the *avant-gardes* themselves.¹⁰ It has been a long debate over whether the transgressions of art foreshadow the coming of a new society, as the early Breton thought it did, or whether they merely challenged the institutional boundaries of art with the new and provocative. Whether we consider this definition of Surrealist music adequate, whether a typewriter in an orchestra is Surreal enough, rests upon this controversy over the *avant-garde*.

It is with the intention of thinking about Surrealism's adherence to Breton's inner voice, to the subconscious and its states of spontaneous creation, that it is useful to turn to the technique of automatism. A method for creating Surrealist art, automatism involves tuning into the subconscious association of disparate elements that appear chaotically to the inner sensibility. Breton asserts Surrealism's adherence to this inner voice, while Leiris argues for the significance of this voice as it expresses itself to the world. The mechanisms of the subconscious are revealed by automatism, so that automatic writing, for instance, rearranges phrases into an order that is automatically generated by grammar. Automatic writing thus represents the functioning of thought without being thought, the form of the appearance of language in the world. This writing is also significant, as it represents the world back to itself, but without the sense that this world usually possesses. Breton and Leiris regard Surrealist music as impossible because they do not conceive of music as having significance, yet this is precisely the kind of music that the *avant-garde* of the twentieth century produced. *Avant-garde* music has often used the pre-recorded sounds of the world in order to render these

Figure 1 Front cover of Nurse With Wound's *Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion* (1985). Artwork and design by Steven Stapleton.



sounds and this world strange. In the history of experimental sound work, this distinction between the abstract and the significant is best problematised by *musique concrète*. Pierre Schaeffer coined this title to describe compositions that use sounds that have been recorded in the world, rather than generated by electronic equipment or played instrumentally as music. In the history of experimental music, Schaeffer and Pierre Henry are well known for making collages from acousmatic sounds (those whose origin is visually inconceivable, abstract or absent).¹¹ Many of Henry's recordings could well be described as Surreal. His *Variations for a Door and a Sigh* (1963) is one such recording that plays with the sound of a squeaky door, a sound that we only generally perceive subconsciously. Schaeffer accepts that Surrealism is an inevitable consequence of using concrete sound materials, as composers remain true to the source of sounds which then become strange amidst other sounds.¹² Yet his searching was for a new language of music, one that despite its significations in the concrete, would also contain its own abstract, or musical, qualities. In this he was a formalist, building a library of sounds so that he could build such a language. The contradictions at work in *musique concrète*, which veers between abstraction and signification, are only resolved at the level of the recording.¹³ Many of its recordings, especially those of Henry, construct a duplicity that is characteristic of Breton's own mechanisms of production. Whether the arrangements of *musique concrète* draw upon the subconscious or some other elusive logic is beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps however we should ask not whether *musique concrète* was Surreal, but whether Surrealism was musical, since subconscious structures of automatism often reproduce abstract relations that are redolent of *music*. Here we strike some of the problems with theorising Surrealism on Breton's terms. For the machine that produces the marvelous and unexpected may well be a musical machine, rearranging known elements according to indistinct but intuitive formulas of the subconscious.

It is through the doubled face of Surrealism, with one eye on the world and the other to structures of the subconscious, that we can turn to Nurse With Wound's *Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion* (1985) as a kind of litmus test for the possibility of a Surrealist music. One reason for choosing this album, rather than another, is that it was conceived by its coordinating artist, Steven Stapleton, as a Surrealist project.¹⁴ It is not with a wish to return to Stapleton's intentions that I want to cite him extensively here. For after the qualities of automatism itself, he wanted to be entirely absent from the album, to evacuate signs of the artist's personality from the work. The cover of the album also aspires to anonymity, or at least to disguise, featuring as it does the photograph of a pair of smiling female singers and boasting such imaginary ditties as "Kissin' and a Cuddlin'" and "Itsy Bitsy Love Affair." Stapleton wants to be absent from the record so that he can listen to it and over again, without getting bored.¹⁵ This folding, of listening to one's own record only not to recognise it, has that masturbatory quality of Breton's automatism, in which a half-conscious artist is absorbed by inner hallucinations. Two later Nurse With Wound recordings, *Automating: Volume One* (1986) and *Automating: Volume Two* (1989) referred more directly to Breton's creative method as well as to Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing* (1979), which the tracks pay occasional tribute to.¹⁶ Stapleton also shared with the Surrealists an interest in the Comte de Lautréamont, calling Nurse With Wound's first record *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella* (1979), a phrase from this writer that was made famous by the Surrealists. Stapleton's third record, *Merzbild Schwet* (1980), paid tribute to that close ally of Surrealism, Dada.¹⁷

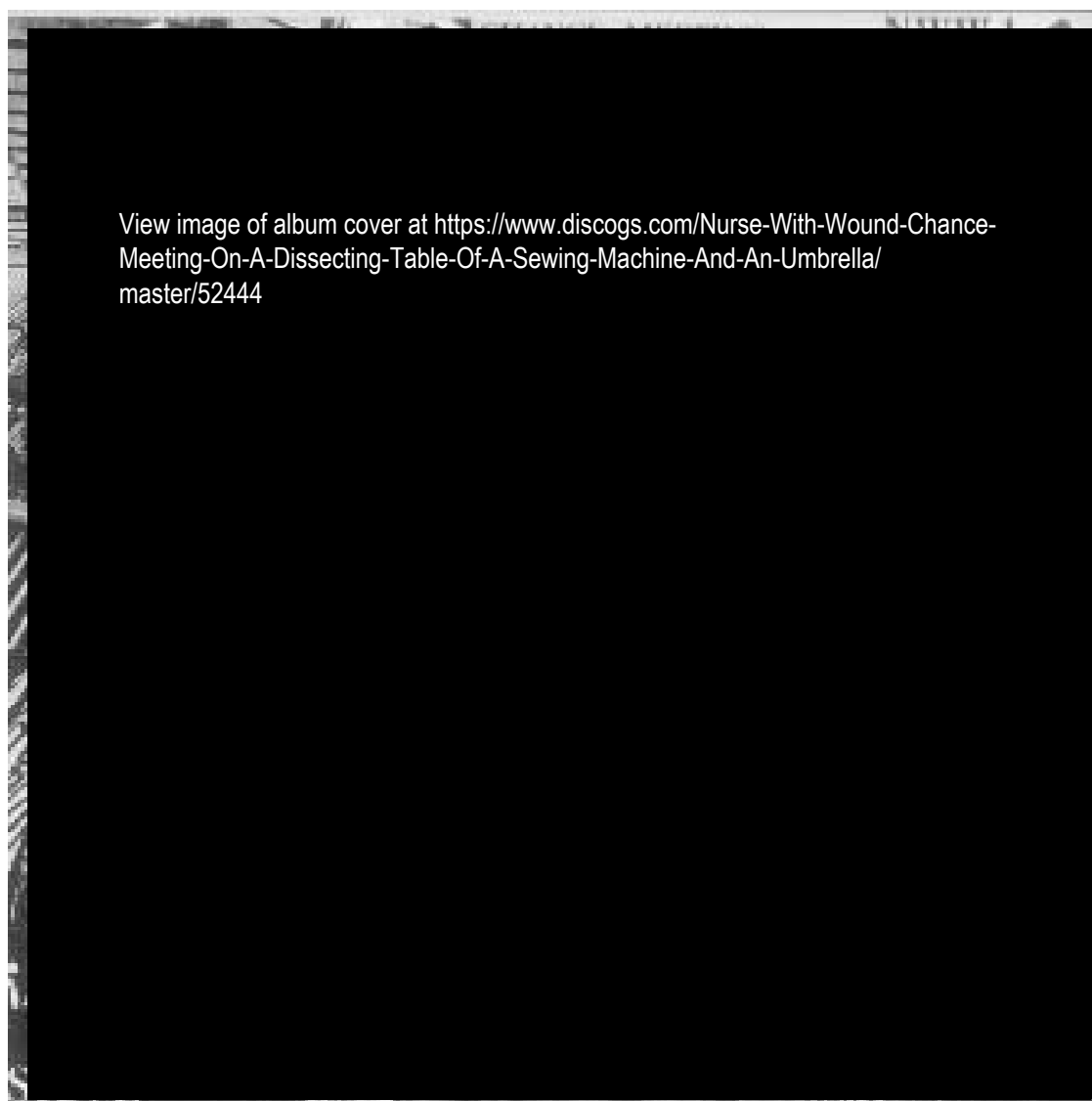
Of interest in *Sylvie and Babs* is the way in which it challenges, on the basis of a Surrealist methodology, the Surrealist discrimination against music. For the recording is indifferent to its sources of sound, including music indifferently alongside other forms of recording. From instrumentation to field recordings, samples of other records to original studio compositions, *Sylvie and Babs* is inclusive. The world that is signified is both musical and not musical, signifying and abstract. The arrangement of sounds is chaotic but certain, the placement of this frog's croak or that scratch appearing both random and decisive. The album is not completely free of the abstract relations of sound, that musical form that Leiris wanted to deny Surrealism. Yet the voices, clicks and clatters that populate the record also lend this music the quality of signification. From the deep rolling vistas of drums to high pitched flowerings of wind instruments, music is itself doubled to signify itself as music. The sounds of the world and the manufacture of music are coextensive, in an indifference to their difference. Instrumentation may be followed by an airplane, for instance, whose sound relates somehow to the guttural noises and reverse guitar-loops that underlie and follow it. These relations defamiliarise the structure of musical arrangement, as sounds identifiable and not identifiable, instrumental and non-instrumental, collide. In a late interview, Stapleton says that, "I take ordinary things—instruments, solos, what have you, and place them in unusual settings, giving a completely different angle on the way instruments and composition are looked at."¹⁸ The musical, that relation of non-signifying sounds that would make up a composition, is itself here significant, the juxtaposition of drum rhythms and guitar solos, both of which feature on *Sylvie and Babs*, rubbing side-by-side with vocal samples, distorted popular music, and samples of who-knows what. In the process the most conservative of musical identities, instruments and their arrangements, are made strange. Including all kinds of sound in this recording, and many of their combinations, Stapleton renders an indifference to what is music and what it is not, defamiliarising both sound and music alike.

This indifference can be historically situated. The comments of an unknown interviewer in a 1980 conversation with Stapleton and the other musicians who played on the first Nurse With Wound album, *Chance Meeting of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella*, make sense of this apparent senselessness. The interviewer identifies the musicians as collectors, and describes the notoriety Stapleton had already gained as a collector, roadie and groupie of the German Krautrock movement. When the three members of this first incarnation of Nurse With Wound produce a list of the best thirty records ever released, the interviewer only recognises two or three of them. He then observes:

the obsessive qualities of these three members of the group, who think that this list is of great significance because it's already becoming clear to me that NWW's music has arisen precisely for the reason that these records no longer circulate (or records like them), and the key to understanding the motivation behind NWW is to probe a bit deeper into the mentality of the collector, as represented by these three particular specimens.¹⁹

The list of influences published with this first Nurse With Wound album, updated with the next, and subsequently published as a part of an Audion Guide, has been a significant part of its identity. This list of hundreds of rare, obscure and sometimes non-existent records offered a means of navigating the influences behind Stapleton's recordings. Before the internet made the list readily available, this guide was itself one of the great collectable objects of underground English music, and the albums listed on it were eagerly sought by vinyl enthusiasts.²⁰ The aspiration represented by this guide is to collect everything, to attain a totality that cannot be attained, not least because some of the records listed on it are fiction. The aspiration of *Sylvie and Babs* is toward a similar totality. Featuring more than thirty people, Stapleton wants it to be a total work of art that would satisfy his ears forever:

Figure 2 Back cover of Nurse With Wound's *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella* (1979). Artwork and design by Steven Stapleton.



It's taken over 13 months and we haven't finished side one yet. I want to make an album that I'm completely happy with and that I can continually listen to, that's why it's taken so long. When I hear the earlier albums I think, I could have done this or that, so I want to make something that's completely foolproof.²¹

The complexity and diversity of the sounds on the record want to brook an infinite number of associations, in a multiplicity so dense it aims to surprise even its creator. Such a will to totality and purity resembles Breton's own idealism. Like Breton, Stapleton despises the conservatism of instrumental music, describing the process of learning an instrument as the demise of "pure sound, music with no limitations, actual freedom from musicianship," and as "changing your true 'musical' expression."²² As art historians have theorised a visual Surrealism that in fact denigrated the visual sensibility, it is also possible to arrive at a Surrealist musicianship that despises music.

Thus it is that in searching for a musical Surrealism we arrive at a record that contradicts the premises by which Surrealism established its rejection of music, and yet would appear to be musical. Its defamiliarisation of music, a music that contributes to *Sylvie and Babs* as one element amongst others, is this marvelous rediscovery of the familiar as unfamiliar, the unexpected out of the expectations of music. What differentiates it from Cocteau's and Satie's *Parade* is the fact that this album has no overall musical structure to which sounds are submitted as instruments. Its Surrealism lies in its automatism, in a multiple series of chaotic associations whose negation of sense is not necessarily a negation of the structures by which sense comes about. One sound leads to or is imposed upon another, one musical form turns to another without being music. The vitality of the album lies in this will to compose without composition, to make a record without making a record, in order to reveal that the subconscious structures of music may not be musical at all.

The author would like to thank Jonathan Marshall for his insightful comments on this paper, comments that I have only been able to partially address here.

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- Henry, Pierre. 1963. *Variations for a Door and a Sigh*. Limelight LS86059.
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- Nurse With Wound. 1989. *Automating, Volume Two*. United Dairies LP. UD030. Re-released on CD in 2002. UD054CD.

Notes

1. Not all Surrealists agreed with Breton's dismissal of music. René Magritte, for example, thought there was a place or music in Surrealism, and even Breton began to collaborate with Louis Aragon and composer George Antheil on an opera. Antheil was the one exception to Breton's condemnation of musicians. See Anne LeBaron, "Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics," *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochead and Joseph Auner. (NY, Routledge, 2002), pp. 27-73 at p. 31.

2. Andre Breton, "Golden Silence," *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1995), pp. 70-74; and *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald, 1972).
3. See, most influentially, Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley: California UP, 1993); and more recently David Lomas, "Modest Recording Instruments: Science, Surrealism and Visuality," *Art History*, 27.1 (September 2004), pp. 627-650.
4. See, for example, *October* editors Rosalind Krauss' and Yve-Alain Bois' *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone, 1997).
5. An important attempt to remedy this omission is represented by Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001).
6. Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 1.
7. *Ibid*, pp. 1-2.
8. Michel Leiris, Sally Price and Jean Jamin, "A Conversation with Michel Leiris," *Current Anthropology*, 29.1 (February 1988), p. 160.
9. For an account of this opera, see LeBaron, p. 30 and Christopher Schiff, "Banging on the Windowpane: Sound in Early Surrealism," in Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992), pp. 140-142.
10. Peter Burger defined the terms of this debate in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984).
11. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (NY: Columbia UP, 1994).
12. See Carlos Palombini, "Pierre Schaeffer, 1953: Towards an Experimental Music," *Electronic Musicological Review* 3 (October 1998), accessed at <<http://www.rem.ufpr.br/REMr3.1/vol3/Schaefferi.html>> on 20 May 2008.
13. For a more detailed discussion of the implicit signficatory nature of musique concrète, see Douglas Kahn, "The Sound of Music," in Michael Bull and Les Back, eds, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 77-91.
14. In at least two interviews Stapleton says he makes Surrealist music. In his interview with David Keenan he describes Surrealism as "the displacement of something ordinary into an extraordinary setting." See Steven Stapleton, interview with William D. and Tamara F., *Unsound*, 2.3-4 (1985), accessed at <<http://brainwashed.com/nww/>> on 20 February 2007; and Interview with David Keenan, *Wire Magazine* (1997), accessed at <<http://www.brainwashed.com/nww/words/wire1997.html>> on 2 July 2007.
15. Steven Stapleton, John Fothergill and Dave Henderson, Interview. *Sounds* (18 February 1984), accessed at <<http://brainwashed.com.nww>> on 20 February 2007.
16. There are, of course, other histories within which Nurse With Wound might be located. Stapleton's collaborations with ex-members of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV place his work in the wake of this industrial milieu in England, although in the interview with Keenan he resists this association, preferring to cite his extensive association with Krautrock groups, placing his collaborations in the heritage of this German movement.
17. In interview with William D. and Tamara F., Stapleton says that "On *Merzbild Schwet* I wanted to create music with the feel and originality of those two great movements, the Futurists and the Dadaists, and I feel the music clearly reflects the essence of those originators. Dada for me was and still is one of the great loves of my life, whereas Futurism seems to lack in reality what conceptually was revolutionary."
18. Interview with Keenan.
19. Online interview (deleted), URL unknown. Accessed on February 2007.
20. This list is now available at <<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/ultimathule/nww/nwwlist.html>>.
21. Interview with Henderson.
22. Steven Stapleton, interview with Gary Levermore conducted on 1980, *Tone Death* 3 (November 1982). Accessed at <<http://brainwashed.com/nww/>> on 20 February 2007.